

## Book Review: Golden State yields a cornucopia of writing

Good book results from a good idea

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### **MY CALIFORNIA: JOURNEYS BY GREAT WRITERS**

Edited by Donna Wares  
Angel City Press, \$16.95

"My California" is both a good book and a good idea: 27 California writers have joined with the Getty, publishers, graphic artists, book representatives and a printer to donate their collective work to support the eviscerated California Arts Council. The last two governors have cut the state arts budget by 97 percent, from \$32 million to \$1 million; now each Californian officially contributes a shameful 3 cents a year to the arts while our Canadian neighbors spend \$1.45 a year. Santa Barbara's (and the world's) Pico Iyer introduces this collection of essays that spans both the geography and the cultural diversity that make us the phenomenon the world can't stop talking about. Because these essays come from California natives or longtime transplants, they don't pontificate about the grandness or horrors this state represents for others. Rather, they are intimate and engaging about how many kinds of pleasure, how many kinds of home, we enjoy here. And of course, driving figures in many of these; it is no accident that the cover illustration is David Hockney's famous photo montage looking across the desert down the raggedy Pearblossom Highway. Hector Tobar remembers "staring out the window of my parents' sky-blue Volkswagen Beetle, listening to the climbing sound of my father shifting gears." He goes on to explain, "In Los Angeles, we don't suffer traffic fools well, because we drive almost as much as we breathe."

The road trip is a primary California experience, and T. Jefferson Parker takes a friend on



Highway 395 into the Mojave where "the speedometer hits eighty but you feel like you're standing still. The day is bright and sunny and the windows of your truck are cold."

The pair head to the remnants of the Owen River because they are hooked on fly fishing, "a progressive disease, like rabies, that starts with an innocuous bite then lies dormant."

Mark Arax, serious backyard farmer in the Central Valley, writes of encountering real farmers in the local coffee shop "comparing the size of their grapes like some boys compare their privates."

Both are the family jewels. In a place where "farmers weren't farmers. They were growers," he visits the world's biggest farm equipment show to take in 2.5 million square feet of tractor flesh and related hoopla.

Aimee Liu looks at Beverly Hills and sees that beneath the glitz and pomp, "the current between desire and fear runs hard through Beverly Hills. . . . The wattage of that current is transience. Who is staying and for how long?"

Michael Chabon extols the pleasures of Berkeley: "Where passion is married to intelligence, you may find genius, neurosis, madness or rapture."

Patt Morrison reminds us of the marvelously varied pleasures of downtown Los Angeles, often invisible to those who live "in the 310 area code -- people who go to Paris more often than they go to downtown L.A."

Carolyn See writes of the surprising saving grace she finds at The Lake Shrine of the Self-Realization Fellowship, which is tucked in behind hedges on Sunset Boulevard. Lakewood as a hometown doesn't send chills of delight, but D.J. Waldie honors his neighborhood, an intersection of character and place where "the aspiration wasn't for more but only for enough," a place of pilgrimage and gratefulness for those fortunate to have a home of their own.

Because we are all always coming of age here, the ultimate Santa Cruz monster-wave wipe-out-and-live-to-tell story by Matt Warshaw feels appropriate here. He notes that "the essential requirement for big-wave riding is not courage or daring or fitness, but a placid imagination."

Kathi Kamen Goldmark writes of her folk singing group's first paying gig at a San Pedro biker bar, while Derek M. Powazek borrows his father's car for a madcap misadventure in San Francisco.

The U.S.-Mexico border at Tijuana "was an idea, not a thing" when Ruben Martinez played joyful soccer on a field that ran along the border. Little Saigon invented itself smack in the middle the Orange County town of Westminster, and Anh Do's family settled there. They started a newspaper that met the needs of other Vietnamese refugees who fled the cold and isolation of the Arkansas and Pennsylvania, where they tried to make this country work for them.

Sacramento, our ignored capital, merits two very different essays: one on the surprise pleasures of the American River, the other celebrating the very un-California nature of the almost Midwestern city.

This book was a six-month wonder from idea to distribution. Many exceptional California writers are missing here, as are parts of the California experience. But that's the beauty of this place: It would be difficult to imagine a multivolume series extolling the pleasures and foibles of, say, Nebraska. The editors are encouraged to produce at least a second book to sweep in more of the names and niches that make up our exotic quilt of places and cultures.

Do yourself two favors. Enjoy the excellent work here that demonstrates the community among our artists, and do so knowing that all proceeds support the California Arts Council's writing programs.